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FOOTNOTES

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THE VERDICT ON MYKONOS—AND THE FUTURE OF IRAN

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This essay is based on her talk to FPRI's History Institute for Teachers on "Iran and the Geopolitics of the Middle East," cosponsored and hosted by the Senator John Heinz History Center, Pittsburgh, PA, and cosponsored by the World Affairs Council of Pittsburgh, on October 27-28, 2012.

They say a good news story is like an onion. The more one peels at it, the newer the layers that surface. If depth and longevity are the golden standard for a critical story, then the assassinations of the four Iranian opposition members at the Mykonos Restaurant in Berlin, Germany, in September 1992 surpasses that standard. It's more like a cluster bomb; twenty years later, it continues to explode. The verdict that was issued five years after the killings, and the subsequent decision by the European Union to cut ties with Tehran in 1997, achieved what the perpetual threats of war have not done.

What are those achievements? To the multitude of Iranian exiles, first and foremost, it was the bestowing of a most elemental human gift—safety. Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini's henchmen were methodically killing people from a list of five-hundred diaspora dissidents—artists, writers, intellectuals, and opposition members, against whom the Leader had issued fatwas. The “anointed” were not safe whether in Washington, DC, Rome, Paris, or Geneva. As European governments turned a blind eye, the assassins crossed border after border and accomplished their diabolical mission one after another. With dozens dead, a generation of patriotic and brilliant future leaders was lost. Until the 1997 verdict of the Berlin court, which implicated Tehran's top leadership in masterminding the killings, the luxury of European safety belonged only to their own.

What followed safety was dignity. Disaffected Iranian immigrants, who—in Germany and elsewhere in Europe—had forever felt dispensable and invisible, were empowered by the court's nod of acknowledgement. They stepped out of the shadows. Many invested in the notion of citizenship and civil participation in their adopted communities. Thereafter, they were far more inclined to fully stop at the red light now that the protections of the law extended to them too.

Western policy makers and non-governmental organizations have spent millions and endless efforts trying to decipher just how to circumvent Tehran in funding individuals and NGOs inside Iran in the hopes of cultivating the

democratic movement there. But most of these convoluted and ultimately questionable moves never accomplished what the Mykonos trial did in the Einsteinian elegance of its simplicity. It gave its spectators a glimpse of how real democracy works. Among the audience members at the trial were former Iranian political prisoners whose own trials, which had banished them to years of incarceration, had begun and ended within an hour. Their lives, and dreamy perceptions of a future ideal society, transformed by three-and-a-half years of spectatorship. For those activists, the trial was a vocational training during which they witnessed the tedious and exasperating machinations that went into a just and ultimately groundbreaking verdict. No complicated schemes. Only the west, the birthplace of modern democracy, being itself and exercising what it knows well.

The effectiveness of the Mykonos verdict is easy to glean from Tehran's treatment of it. A regime that never fails to boast of and embrace the vilest of acts—annually marking the 1979 seizure of the US embassy with great fanfare and printing portraits of terrorists such as the assassin of the late Egyptian president, Anwar Sadat, on postal stamps—has kept mum about the Mykonos case. When Tehran's spin doctors saw that they could not spin this one, they did their best to bury it altogether. But they did not fail to register its magnitude. The laws of political survival dictated that they retool and recast their message and image. After all, 1997 was an election year. That April, the presidential candidate, Mohammad Khatami, was lagging in the polls. By the end of June, he was elected to presidency and two unprecedented years of political openness that, for better or worse, marked the dawn of the “reform era,” began. In those two years, a handful of books set the national debate on a new trajectory. The most significant of those followed in the footsteps of the German prosecutors and investigated the killings of a few leading dissidents inside the country to draw the same conclusions as the Berlin trial had.

Where is Iran's democratic movement heading? It's hard to tell. But this much is for certain: That rather than shying away from the tales of its thirty-some-year suffering, it needs to proudly claim them as the pillars of its legitimacy. In that painful history, the Mykonos case is a luminous example of how suffering can lead to dignity and justice, and what the west can transparently do to be on the right side of that struggle.

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